

# The Voice of the Stranger - A Manifesto for the 21st Century

*Jim Conner*

Thomas Merton wrote the 'Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra' in 1961. At the time he characterized it in his Journals as 'bitter and unjust. It lacks perspective. It cannot do much good to anyone in its present shape, and yet I have mailed it off to him and may get it published before I have time to make any serious changes'.<sup>1</sup> And in a letter to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy he refers to it as 'an indignant letter, ... irate (more than it should be)'.<sup>2</sup> One might wonder why Merton published this letter when he himself felt that it was not properly balanced. The reason can perhaps be found in a letter to Abdul Aziz. 'There is no question that in these manoeuvrings of power we see a dire evil force at work, a force which is spiritual and more than human. ... I feel that a certain spiritual outlook does have some value after all'.<sup>3</sup> Merton felt that those who think only in terms of weapons and money and the manipulation of political groups are moved by something almost diabolical. They need to be aware of the fact that a higher spiritual value is threatened by this.

In 1961 Merton was preoccupied with the danger of nuclear warfare between the Soviets and the US. He felt strongly that this precarious situation could easily result even in the destruction of not only both systems, but the very world itself. And the greatest danger stemmed

from the fact that people everywhere were dominated by fear. At about the same time as this, Merton wrote the article 'The root of war is fear' which appeared as a chapter of the reworked book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. In it he wrote:

At the root of all war is fear; not so much the fear men have of one another as the fear they have of *everything*. It is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves. ... They cannot trust anything, because they have ceased to believe in God. It is not only our hatred of others that is dangerous but also and above all our hatred of ourselves: particularly that hatred of ourselves which is too deep and too powerful to be honestly faced. For it is this which makes us see evil in others and unable to see it in ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

He wrote in his Journal: 'The root is my own fear, my own desperate desire to survive even if only as a voice uttering an angry protest, while the waters of death close over the whole continent'.<sup>5</sup> Yet in spite of this, he maintained a hope in God that the world might be spared this calamity. 'This is a case where, in spite of evidence, one must continue to hope. One must not give in to defeatism and despair: just as one must hope for life in a mortal illness which has been declared incurable'.<sup>6</sup>

It is particularly this which makes his words so relevant for this 21st century. The Cold War has more or less ended, even though there still remains a deep distrust of Russia. Yet it has been said that 'those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it'. Today, as a result of 9/11 and other similar events, the world is even more filled with fear. Our current US Administration has played on this element of fear in formulating its policies both within the nation and worldwide. Fear makes people more docile and willing to follow the leaders who claim that they know the solution. Fear leads us into what Merton calls 'the greatest sin of the West' – 'it is not only greed and cruelty, not only moral dishonesty and infidelity to the truth, but above all *its unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race*'.<sup>7</sup> As a result the world gets divided into the 'good' (us) and the evil (most of the rest). And if we label another as 'evil', then the only solution is to wipe them out or at least ignore them as if they did not exist. Merton says: 'We build up such an obsession with evil, both in ourselves and in others, that we waste all our mental energy trying to account for this evil, to punish it, to exorcise it, or to get rid of it in any way we can. In the end there is no outlet left but violence. We have to destroy something or

someone. If only he can be destroyed, conflict will cease, evil will be done with, there will be no more war'.<sup>8</sup>

This applies today not only to Iran and North Korea and possibly still Russia, but to any nation or people who will not accept our self-designated role as 'leader of the free world'. It leads to disdain of any world organization such as the United Nations which we cannot control for our own purposes. It is precisely this 'unmitigated arrogance' which prevents any real sharing with others, whether individuals or nations.

The greatest problem in all of this is that it destroys the true basis for civilization. Humanity has been created as one family under God as our Father. We have been created in the 'image and likeness' of God. But Christian revelation shows us that God is a Trinity – three Persons in one Nature: Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one living cycle of Love. At the Last Supper Jesus prayed that 'they may all be one, even as you; Father, are in Me and I in You, that they may become perfectly one' (John 17:22–3). The whole mission of Jesus Christ was to reestablish that unity in God and in one another which was our original creation. St Paul tells us that God 'has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to the purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:9). God desires that all humanity might live in unity and harmony, not merely in toleration of one another, but in true love and charity. Over and over, in his words and his parables and his own example, Jesus calls us to 'love one another as I have loved you'. Genesis shows us the first great disruption of the human family. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke this cycle of love. Their love was no longer centered in that love of the Triune God, but was turned in on themselves. They wanted to be 'like unto God'. This rupture was further manifested when Cain slaughtered his brother. He was asked by God: 'Where is your brother?' and his answer was: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen 4:9). This scene is repeated over and over today in the myriad ways we ignore the good in 'the other'. Merton sees this as the great sin of humanity:

Western civilization is now in full decline into barbarism because it has been guilty of a twofold disloyalty: to God and to Man. To a Christian who believes in the mystery of the Incarnation, this is not two disloyalties but one. Since the Word was made Flesh, God is in man.

God is in *all men*. All men are to be seen and treated as Christ. Failure to do this, the Lord tells us, involves condemnation for disloyalty to the most fundamental of revealed truths. 'I was thirsty and you gave me not to drink. I was hungry and you gave me not to eat ...' (Matthew 25:42). This could be extended in every possible sense: and is meant to be so extended, over the entire area of human needs, not only for bread, for work, for liberty, for health, but also for truth, for belief, for love, for acceptance, for fellowship and understanding.<sup>9</sup>

This quotation alone might be seen as Merton's great Manifesto for the 21st century. In it he calls us to recognize all people as a revelation of God and consequently to approach them with reverence and openness of heart. In fact Merton says that:

... it is my belief that we should not be too sure of having found Christ in ourselves until we have found him also in the part of humanity that is most remote from our own. Christ is found not in loud and pompous declarations but in humble and fraternal dialogue. He is found less in a truth that is imposed than in a truth that is shared. If I insist on giving you my truth, and never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us. Christ is present 'where two or three are gathered in my name'. But to be gathered in the name of Christ is to be gathered in the name of the Word made flesh, of God made man. It is therefore to be gathered in the faith that God has become man and can be seen in man and that he can enlighten and inspire love in and through any man that I meet. It is true that the visible Church alone has the official mission to sanctify and teach all nations, but no one knows that the stranger he meets coming out of the forest in a new country is not already an invisible member of Christ and perhaps one who has some providential or prophetic message to utter.<sup>10</sup>

Humanity today needs to learn how to listen to one another on every level of life. We must all learn anew that we *are* our brother and sister's keeper. In the gospel of Mark a scribe came to Jesus asking: 'Which commandment is the greatest of all?' Jesus answered by reciting the command from Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said to him, 'you are right, Teacher, you have truly said that He is one, and there is no other but He, and to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the

strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' And when Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:28-34).

In these words both Jesus and the scribe united love of God and love of neighbour as one commandment – as the greatest of all. Jesus was speaking not to one of his disciples or followers, but to a scribe.

But Jesus went beyond even that. He calls us to more than was enjoined in the Deuteronomic Law. In another similar incident a lawyer asked Jesus 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' 'Jesus said to him 'What is written in the Law?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself'. And He said to him, 'You have answered right; do this and you shall live'. And when the man pursued the issue asking, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan – the hated foreigner who alone came to the help of the man in the ditch, concluding with the words: 'Go and do likewise' (Luke 10:25-37).

Jesus gave this challenge to the people of His own time. He did not come to lead a political revolution but a social revolution in which the social relations between people are radically changed. Merton gives the same challenge to us of today in the words chosen as the title of this conference.

This call to heed the voice of the stranger is a call to recognize that 'the kingdom of God is in your midst'. It is a call to recognize that every person is a part of that kingdom with God as the Father of all. This extends not only to friends but even to enemies.

You have heard it said: you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do that? You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-8).

Jesus calls us to love even our enemy – to 'turn the other cheek, go the extra mile' (Mt 5:39-41) but to do so not just out of a spirit of

humility, but in a realization of the fact that the enemy is also our brother or sister and that the strike on the cheek comes from a hurting brother or sister – whether that hurt is right or wrong. Jesus goes so far as to make our reaction to the other the sole criterion for the final judgment. In his book *Jesus Today* Albert Nolan says:

To follow Jesus today is to identify so completely with all my human brothers and sisters that I am able to say: 'Whatever you do to any of them, you do to me'. In other words, my identity is not just my unique individual self. My identity is the greater self of the human race. This is not to be understood as simply a metaphor or simile. We are not being challenged to love our neighbour *as if* our neighbour were ourself. The identification is objective and real. God *is* one with all human beings, and we *are* one with one another, whether we are aware of it or not.<sup>11</sup>

This means that the 'stranger' is never really the stranger, but is actually a part of myself. Hence to cut him or her off is to cut off a part of myself, and that a part that may even be the better part of myself! The great sin of today is for people to think that they have the truth and that others do not. Merton sees this realized throughout history in the efforts of the colonizers whether for State or for Church. He says:

One of the great tragedies of the Christian West is the fact that for all the good will of the missionaries and colonizers they could not recognize that *the races they conquered were essentially equal to themselves and in some ways superior*. It was certainly right that Christian Europe should bring Christ to the Indians of Mexico and the Andes, as well as to the Hindus and the Chinese: but where they failed was in their inability to *encounter Christ* already potentially present in the Indians, the Hindus and the Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

He contrasts this with the spirit of Christianity in the Acts of the Apostles and the Fathers of the 1st century:

Christianity made its way in the world of the first century not by imposing Jewish cultural and social standards on the Gentiles, but by becoming free of them so as to be 'all things to all people'. The early Fathers accepted the Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and Socrates and saw them as precursors of Christ. They thought that while God had manifested Himself to the Jews through the Law and the Prophets He had also spoken to the Gentiles through their philosophers. However by the Middle Ages this lesson had been forgotten. The preachers of the Gospel to the newly discovered continents became preachers and disseminators of European culture

and power. They did not enter into dialogue with ancient civilizations: they imposed upon them their own monologue and in preaching Christ they also preached themselves. They omitted to listen to the voice of Christ in the unfamiliar accents of the Indian, as Clement had listened for it in the pre-Socratics.<sup>13</sup>

He recoils at the thought that 'whatever India may have said to the West she was forced to remain silent. Whatever China had to say, though some of the first missionaries heard it and understood it, the message was ultimately ignored as irrelevant'. The same can be said of the voices of the Maya and Inca, who had deep things to say. Likewise in relation to our own American Indians. 'One shudders at the voice of cerebral Western arrogance judging the living spiritual mystery of primitive man and condemning it to exclusion from the category on which love, friendship, respect and communion were to depend'.

We see the importance given to the stranger in Hebrew thought. Abraham gave hospitality to three strangers who turned out to be angels of God. This shows us that the stranger may be sent by God to us for some reason, and to fail to receive the stranger may mean that we close ourselves off from hearing the voice of God. Jesus said: 'Whoever receives one whom I send receives me, and whosoever receives me receives Him who sent me' (John 13:20). In contrast to this, the modern world cuts off the stranger, whether by the iron curtain of Eastern Europe or the concrete walls of Israel or the fences and walls of our own southern borders. Merton says: 'He cannot possibly realize that the stranger has something very valuable, something irreplaceable to give him: something that can never be bought with money: the spiritual understanding of a friend who belongs to a different culture. ... The tourist never finds the brother in the stranger'.<sup>14</sup>

Merton learned this importance of the stranger by confronting the stranger within his own heart. He sought for solitude throughout his life. But he was aware of the struggle which solitude brings. He realized that true solitude does not isolate us from one another. On the contrary, he saw that a great deal of what passes as mutual sharing is in actual fact vain pretenses of solidarity that tend to substitute themselves for real solidarity, while masking an inner spirit of irresponsibility and selfishness. Much of what passes for 'community' or 'sharing' is actually mere diversion. Solitude brings one into contact with the deeper and darker parts of one's heart. It brings the realization of the fact that underneath the apparently 'well organized'



and rational life, there lies an abyss of irrationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed apparent chaos. Yet it is this very chaos which brings the solitary into oneness with the rest of humanity. Merton says:

Even though he may be physically alone the solitary remains united to others and lives in profound solidarity with them, but on a deeper and mystical level. He realizes that he is one with them in the peril and anguish of their common solitude: not the solitude of the individual only, but the radical and essential *solitude of man* – a solitude which was assumed by Christ and which, in Christ, becomes mysteriously identified with the solitude of God. Hence his solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure and gentle sympathy with all others, whether or not they are capable of realizing the tragedy of their plight.<sup>15</sup>

And in this solitude Thomas Merton discovered his true nature in Christ and in solidarity with the rest of humanity.

In the silence of the countryside and the forest, in the cloistered solitude of my monastery, I have discovered the whole Western Hemisphere. ... It seems that I have heard the voice of all the hemisphere in the silence of my monastery, a voice that speaks from the depths of my being with a clarity at once magnificent and terrible: as if I had in my heart the vast and solitary pampas. It seems that entire cities with great opulence and terrible indigence side by side live inside me. It seems that the ancient civilizations of Mexico, older even than Egypt, gather in unspeakable silence in my heart. It seems that I hear the forgotten syllables of ancient wisdom which has never died and which contains in its secrets an image of truth that no person has recognized, an image, symbolic and prophetic, like that of Jesus Christ. In reality, it seems at times that this presence inside me speaks with the voice of God Himself.<sup>16</sup>

This is in stark contrast with what Merton calls 'the heresy of individualism':

Thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary 'unity' against all others. The affirmation of the self as simply 'not the other'. The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my heart can say *yes to everyone*. ... There is much that one cannot 'affirm' or 'accept', but first one must say yes where one really can.<sup>17</sup>

This is the mentality that he would develop even further when he wrote 'Final Integration'. Using the work of Dr Reza Arasteh, a psychiatrist from the East, he spoke of this as the goal for monastic formation, and one might add, of human formation today. It gives us a more balanced expression of what he spoke of in the Letter to Pablo Cuadra. There he admitted that he expressed himself with disturbed emotions. Here he shows even more clearly what humanity is called to in this 21st century:

The person who is 'fully born' has an entirely 'inner experience' of life. He is in a certain sense 'cosmic' and 'universal' man. He is in a certain sense identified with everybody: or in the familiar language of the New Testament he is 'all things to all men'. He is able to experience their joys and sufferings as his own, without becoming dominated by them. ... The one who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. He has embraced *all of life*. ... He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all mankind. He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. ... The finally integrated person is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such persons of insight.<sup>18</sup>

This is the type of person that Merton referred to in his talk at Calcutta, when he spoke of the importance for 20th-century man of what he called 'communication in depth'; a 'communication which leads to communion',<sup>19</sup> or when he said at Bangkok that 'in each of us the Christian person is that which is open to all other persons, because ultimately all other persons are Christ'.<sup>20</sup> Only such a person can truly accept the 'stranger' and see him as a part of himself. Only such a person can fully carry out the injunction of Jesus to 'love one another as I have loved you'. Hence in order to fulfill the aspirations of Merton, as well as the command of Jesus Christ, we must grow into that 'full person in Christ' that we are created to be. But we are all frail and weak and stand in need of the mercy of God. 'My little children, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the expiation for our sins' (Jn 2:1-2).

Jesus Christ stands as the perfect example of the final integration to which we are called. 'We have not a great high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin' (Heb 4:15). The night before

He suffered, Jesus brought His disciples together to share in the Paschal meal. But before this happened, 'He took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples' (Jn 13:5). It is striking that Jesus did this while Judas was still among the disciples. It was as if He were trying one last time to prove to Judas and all the disciples His intense love for them. He knew full well that Judas would betray Him. He knew full well that Peter would deny Him three times in the course of the coming night. He knew full well that all of the disciples would flee when He was arrested. And yet He wanted to give them this proof of His love. Truly, 'having loved His own, He loved them to the end'.

And yet even after this, Judas still left. 'And it was night'. And in that darkness Jesus felt the need for a yet greater proof of His love. And so He gave to them and to us His own Body 'given up for you' and His own Blood 'shed for you', anticipating what He would do later but also uniting us with what He does. Truly, as John says, 'God loved us even in our sin'. And He tells them 'Do this in memory of Me'. To do this does not mean simply to repeat the sacramental action Jesus performs. It means to imitate Him in giving ourselves out of love for one another – even our enemies; Jesus gives us the Eucharist in order that in sharing in this, we might be called anew to share with one another in the love that has been so freely given by Christ and in this way to enter into the new 'Kingdom of God'.

When Paul reminded the Corinthians of what He had received from the Lord in the institution of the Eucharist, he did not do so simply in order to instruct them. He began by saying 'In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse' (1 Cor 11:17–26). They may have had full faith in the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist that they shared, but they failed to grasp that the Body of Christ was not simply the sacramental Body, but the full Body of the total Christ, including all their brothers and sisters. They may have celebrated the breaking of the Bread, but they failed to do so 'in memory of Me' – remembering that at the Last Supper Christ first washed the feet of the disciples, and whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we also receive the commission to do likewise – to care for one another in love and sacrificial charity. Only then is the memory of the Lord complete. Only then do we proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes. Only then do we remember that the servant is not greater than the Master. 'Truly I say to you, whoever receives anyone I send,

receives Me'. And this includes the stranger and even the enemy. We are to receive the Lord not just into our mouth, but into our hands. We are to receive the total Body of Christ and care for our brothers and sisters with that same reverence we would show to the Eucharistic Body. 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another. By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:34).

This is the 'fully integrated person' who is called to build the new Kingdom and to exclude no one from this Kingdom – for God excludes no one. The major powers of today's world exclude one another. They even exclude many within their own societies. But we are called to exclude no one. When Peter was reconciled with the risen Lord, he was asked three times 'Do you love Me?' And to each response Jesus enjoined 'Feed my lambs – tend my sheep' (Jn 21:15–19). Peter was reconciled to Christ by being reconciled with the flock of Christ. And Jesus made no exception as to who His sheep and lambs are. It has been said that precisely here lies a fundamental difference between the Orthodox and the Roman approach to the role of Peter. The Orthodox base his role on this passage from John, with its primary emphasis on service and mutuality, whereas the Roman Church bases itself on the text from Matthew 16:18: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church. To you I give the keys of the Kingdom of heaven', with its emphasis on authority and power. Here we see a perfect example of the need for greater dialogue and sharing in order to come to a mutual understanding of the plan of Christ. This was the type of dialogue and communication that Merton realized is needed both in the world and in the Church of today.

One might ask: to what extent was Thomas Merton himself such a person as he calls for? From my own experience of him, I would say that he was a good example of someone who had become 'fully integrated' at least by the end of his life. His own background had suited him for this, with a father from New Zealand and a mother from New York, having lived in France, England and the United States from his earliest years. By temperament he was one who sought to maintain peace on every level. The volumes of his correspondence show the universal interest that he maintained both in people and in issues. Even in community he was a person who rarely showed his anger, even when something might occasion it. And when he did, he

sought to quickly remedy the situation by honestly facing it and dealing with it. I never saw him bear a grudge or harbour hard feelings, and had personal experience of the ways that he sought to bring reconciliation to various situations that might arise. Certainly, his experience at 4th and Walnut in 1955 intensified his awareness not only of his love for all people, but of his discovery of Christ in all people. Many have attributed this to his shift to greater involvement in social issues of peace and justice and race relations both in his writings and in his personal interests. His discovery of Zen and other fields of interreligious dialogue broadened him further. In the end, as he himself said:

I think that we have now reached a stage of (long overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline or experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.<sup>21</sup>

Finally we come to the question: what assurance do we have that Merton's words will have any greater influence on the 21st century than they did on the 20th? Left simply in the realm of politics or sociology or even theology, there might be little hope for betterment. However today there is another field of endeavour which is already having an effect in this direction. That is the realm of science and physics in particular, specifically the field of quantum physics.

Many scientists today recognize that matter is not simply made up of tiny particles or atoms, but that these tiny particles are themselves made up of energies. From this there emerged a sense of a universe which is alive, and instead of being isolated, everything seemed to connect, interact and interrelate. This applies both on the microscopic area of particles of matter and in the macroscopic scale of cosmic and planetary evolution. Scientists describe this as a set of *relationships*. In a quantum universe, all life is understood to operate within the context of relational interaction. Everything is affected by everything else. The poet Francis Thompson seems to have caught this when he wrote: 'Thou canst not stir a flower without troubling a star'. Cause and effect has given way to the concept of relationship, interdependence and connectivity. When this is applied to the human person, it is asserted that *we are our relationships*. What we are as individuals, and what we

become in the future, is determined by the quality of our interdependence on others – humans and nonhumans alike.

I will not try to give an exposition of quantum physics as such. For that, I would be totally incompetent. What I would like to do is jump to the way that theologians have picked up on this theory and applied it to the whole area of human interrelationships. Perhaps the best exposition of this can be found in a recent book by Diarmuid O'Murchu, a priest and social psychologist living in England. The book is titled: *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*.<sup>22</sup> The author first makes a threefold distinction which has great bearing on our topic. First there is *individualism* which exalts the individual above all other considerations and is sometimes called 'ego inflation'. Then there is *individuality* which is used to highlight the dignity and priority of the individual above and beyond the collective. Individuality largely diminishes the emphasis on relatedness and almost totally erodes the sense of interdependence that should exist between humans and other life forms. Finally there is *individuation*. He sees both of the first two as being a moral transgression. In a lengthy quotation, he says:

The call of our times – and indeed the authentic journey for every person – is to outgrow, as far as we can, both our dependency and independence as we are invited to become more *interdependent*. This is the evolution from individualism toward individuality, and beyond that into the process of *individuation*.

A key feature of individuation – which is a lifetime process – is the openness and receptivity to a larger reality: social, ecological, spiritual, cosmic. In its most highly developed stages, it merges with mysticism, and the boundaries of 'me' and 'not me' begin to melt away. ... Individuation breaks down barriers and walls that the ego has erected between itself and the surrounding world. We begin to realize that everybody and everything need each other, not in a competitive and manipulative way, but in an orchestrated interaction that seeks to utilize the best that each person and each reality has to give for the benefit of the whole. This leads to the search for community – the desire to relate more closely and more intimately with a wider circle of people.

The search for community is not merely a pursuit of security and intimacy to obviate our loneliness in an anonymous and impersonal world. It is an expression of a yearning from deep within the created order itself, a groaning arising from the heart of creation (to paraphrase St Paul), seeking reciprocity and mutuality.



Humanity today hungers for genuine love, the ability to interrelate and interconnect. We yearn to realign the disparate parts and outgrow our manmade, competitive and destructive isolation. The future toward which we are evolving, the call to participate in the new world order, demands the demolition of many barriers, distinctions and boundaries. We'll get to the future in each other's arms – across all the divides of race, creed, and culture – or otherwise we may not get there at all.<sup>23</sup>

Such a thrust in both physics and in theology shows us that there is hope for what Merton saw and said when he reminded the meeting in Calcutta: 'We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are'.<sup>24</sup>

And 'what we are' is the one Body of Christ, bound together in the very life of the Triune God. The Trinity is not simply a Mystery of Faith. It is the Mystery 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). Jesus prayed that 'they may all be one, even as You, Father are in Me, and I in You, that they may become perfectly one' (John 17:22–3).

However we cannot wait for society to come to this point. What is called for is true conversion. It has been said that the Greek word *metanoia* is the etymological opposite of *paranoia* or fear. Merton has said that the root of violence and war is fear. And John tells us that 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18). Every person must begin within our own hearts and minds to foster this transformation of consciousness.

Diarmuid O'Murchu remarks that:

It has been said that selfishness is natural, and in a sense that is true. But nature is not static; it is evolutionary. The ego has evolved over many thousands of years. Today it has reached a critical point. It has become destructive, so that it would be perfectly natural for us to take a giant leap forward, to transcend the limitations of the ego, to develop a greater, more universal sense of the self – not by fighting against anything in us that is natural but by developing another great longing, the natural desire for unity, community, oneness and love.<sup>25</sup>

This can begin with our own prayer, asking the help of God, for Jesus has told us 'Apart from Me, you can do nothing!' One can also apply the simple Buddhist meditation practice of loving kindness: breathing in the pain and suffering and disunity of humanity and

breathing out the peace and unity and harmony of all. Perhaps the best conclusion can be found in the example of Merton at the end of the Calcutta conference when he asked all to join hands in prayer. And so I would ask you to do the same:

O God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You and we love you with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together in love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals 1960–1963), ed. Victor A. Kramer, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996: 162.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1985: 132.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid*: 50–1
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions, 1961: 112.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals 1960–1963), ed. Victor A. Kramer, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996: 162.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*: 162
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, New York: New Directions, 1961: 78.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions, 1961: 114.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, New York: New Directions, 1961: 78.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*: 80–1.
- <sup>11</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: a spirituality of radical freedom*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2006: 161.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, New York: New Directions, 1961: 79.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*: 79.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*: 85



- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1960: 188.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Honorable Reader', New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1989: 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co, 1966: 128-9.
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1998: 206-7.
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, New York: New Directions, 1979: 313-14.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*: 334.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*: 313.
- <sup>22</sup> Diarmud O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual implications of the new physics*, New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid*: 95-6.
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, New York: New Directions, 1979: 308.
- <sup>25</sup> Diarmud O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual implications of the new physics*, New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2004: 25.